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ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature and research examines the stress experienced by preservice teachers. This study hypothesized that preservice teachers would generally overrate their preparation, and experience no net change in comfort level over time. A questionnaire was administered to preservice teachers (N=54) prior to their initial 5-week classroom-based teaching experience and again at its conclusion to determine changes in stress levels, as well as perceived sources and symptoms of stress. Additional data were collected to measure personal judgments of adequacy of preparation in 19 basic teaching areas and degrees of comfort with this preparation. Preliminary findings suggested that field experiences alone do not increase stress levels for students. As the semester progressed, work outside the classroom became a greater source of stress. Symptoms of stress included general uneasiness, snappiness to family and friends, and change in eating habits. The findings on perceptions and feelings of comfort indicated that the students did not overrate their readiness for teaching prior to their field experience; they reported, rather, that they were more sure of their preparation and more comfortable with themselves after the 5-week field experience than before it. Four tables displaying the data are included. (JD)

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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF PRESERVICE TEACHER STRESS: FIELD EXPERIENCE MEASURES[1]

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Changing Perceptions of Preservice Teacher Stress: Field Experience Measures

Introduction

The popular press variously depicts teachers as overworked, underpaid, under appreciated, incompetent, overburdened and poorly prepared. While these descriptions are debatable, they do reflect the broad range of expectations that taxpayers, parents, administrators, the press and other educators have for teachers. The past decade has seen the employment picture shift from too many teachers to a serious teacher shortage. Along with this shift has come a plethora of research studies on teacher stress, stress symptoms, coping strategies and teacher burnout. Less well examined is the level of stress experienced by persons preparing to be teachers, especially stress generated by or at the time of entry to a field experience, often prior to student teaching.

This study adds to the growing literature and research which examines the stress of preservice teachers, those preparing to enter the profession. Perceptions of stress levels were collected at two points during the field experience; the sources of stress and symptoms experienced in preservice training were measured. Additional data were also collected to measure personal judgments of adequacy of preparation on nineteen basic teaching areas and degrees of comfort with this preparation.

The researchers hypothesized that preservice teachers would generally initially overrate their preparation and experience no net change in level of comfort, with some individuals experiencing increased feelings of comfort over time and others feeling less comfortable at the end of the field experience.

Perspective

The most prevalent research available on beginning teachers in the past five decades has focused on problems that occur in the early years of a teaching career (Johnston and Ryan, 1983). Frequently cited problems include discipline, isolation, evaluation and grading of student work, and selection of appropriate methods and materials (Ryan et al., 1980; Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984). Beginning teachers have been found to be concerned with their performance in the areas of instruction, student achievement, class management, parent, community, and professional relationships, professional image, and alleviation of feelings of isolation (Applegate, et al., 1977). Ryan (1986) summarized the problems of beginning teachers as including: students, parents, administrators, peers and instruction. The conclusion reached by these researchers is that strain may lead to fatigue and depression resulting in premature exit from the profession. Coping abilities become overburdened.

What is known about stress in beginning teaching has come from studies of the survival stage of induction and

student teaching (Nemser, 1984). Studies of teacher socialization, teacher education, staff development and school improvement allow construction of a general picture of how teachers learn to cope and to improve their teaching over time. Research studies on stress in school settings have examined the nature of stressors (Chicon & Koff, 1980; Mazer & Griffin, 1980), types of stressors (Gmelch & Swent, 1982), sources of stress (Feitler & Tokar, 1981) and the effects of stress on educators (Bloch, 1978).

Corcoran (1989) argues that current fundamental reform in teacher education programs creates additional stress for potential teachers. Increased financial hardship, role ambiguity and uncertainty about expectations are cited as potential sources of stress. In a related study using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Schwab (1989) adds research that examines stress reduction through support from networks of intern teachers.

In a Canadian study of stress and student teachers (Hiebert, Washburn, & Phillips, 1989) subjects reported the degree to which specific instructional tasks contributed to the level of stress. This research supports earlier findings of Feitler and Tokar (1982) in which handling student misbehavior emerged as a primary source of personal stress for regular classroom teachers. The current study adds to previous research by examining relationships between specific task preparation, and level of personal stress at an even earlier point in the teacher preparation process.

Method

A questionnaire was developed to collect data on variables including demographic factors, overall levels of stress, sources of stress, stress-related symptoms, level of perceived preparation for teaching in nineteen areas, and level of comfort/discomfort with those same areas. Levels of overall stress were measured by questions such as "As an individual, how stressful do you feel your life is?" followed by a five item forced choice response that ranged from "extremely stressful" to "not at all stressful." Responses were coded from one to five respectively. Stressors were treated as dichotomous variables: coded "1" if checked or "0" if not checked. Similarly, other variables of interest such as symptoms of stress were treated as dichotomous items that respondents could check if applicable. Demographic data were gathered by asking students to check appropriate categories indicating age, gender, and grade levels they hoped to teach. Finally, respondents were asked to rate (using a scale of 1-5) their perceptions of preparation and their feelings of comfort with nineteen teaching skills such as "ability to plan a reading lesson, handling student discipline problems, mastery of subject matter", etc.

Data Source

The questionnaire was first administered to 54 preservice teacher education students prior to their initial field practicum teaching experience. Field practicum

represents the first formal, supervised classroom teaching that occurs in the teacher education program. Upon completion of required reading and math methods courses, junior and early senior students enroll in a five week, classroom based teaching experience prior to student teaching. University students spend three full days a week in assigned classrooms for a total of fifteen full days. Each student is observed and evaluated by the classroom teacher and university supervisor. The questionnaire was administered again at the conclusion of the five week practicum to determine changes in stress levels, sources, symptoms, and perceptions.

Results

These undergraduate students provided data that indicate remarkably low stress levels. Table 1 provides means for pre and post measures of stress and satisfaction. The stress scores generally fall between "mildly" and "moderately stressful." For the satisfaction items means reported students are "fairly satisfied" for both pre and post periods.

For the item "How stressful do you think your life is?" the mean for the pre was 2.92 (moderately stressful) and dropped to 2.63 (between mildly and moderately stressful) for the post measure. For the stressfulness of the elementary school environments students reported slightly lower means but similar stress levels for pre and post reports.

TABLE 1

Pre-Post Field Experience Stress Levels for Life Stress, University Environment Stress, Elementary Environment Stress and Satisfaction with University Educational Experience

	STRESS*									SATISFACTION**		
	Life			University			Elementary			University		
	N	X	SD	N	X	SD	N	X	SD	N	X	SD
Pre	51	2.92	.80	51	2.92	.66	51	2.75	.66	51	4.14	.66
Post	46	2.63	.71	46	2.72	.83	46	2.30	.51	46	3.94	1.12

* 1.0 = not at all stressful
2.0 = mildly stressful
3.0 = moderately stressful
4.0 = very stressful
5.0 = extremely stressful

** 1.0 = very dissatisfied
2.0 = fairly dissatisfied
3.0 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4.0 = fairly satisfied
5.0 = very satisfied

Stress with the university environment was very similar to that reported for life stress and decreased slightly from pre to post. Interestingly, the satisfaction with the university environment means decreased from pre to post indicating a lowered level of satisfaction over this time period.

Table 2 shows how students ranked twelve items as sources of stress. Responses show little change from pre to post. Grades, coursework and long hours are ranked first to third. Work (outside of academic efforts) became an increased source of stress, as did "individual pupils who continuously misbehave." Of interest is the finding that "trying to uphold/maintain values and standards" and "social relationships" decreased in frequency of reporting by students.

Symptoms of stress were also reported and ranked. General uneasiness, depressed feelings and snappiness to friends and family were ranked one to three in the pre measure. For the post measure, general uneasiness stayed highest, snappiness to friends/family was ranked second and depressed feelings dropped into a tie for sixth ranking. Change in eating habits was reported tied for third highest ranking with headaches on the post measurement. These results appear in Table 3.

Students were next asked to describe their perceptions of preparedness and feelings of comfort for nineteen task/problem areas related to their field experiences.

TABLE 2

Pre-Post Percent and Rank for Sources of Stress

Rank Pre	Rank Post	Source	Yes (Pre) Percent	Yes (Post) Percent	Change Percent
1	1	Grades	76	70	-6
2	2	Coursework	72	67	-5
3	3	Long hours	55	54	-1
4	5	Field experience	37	28	-9
5	8	Trying to uphold/ maintains values and standards	35	20	-15
6	6(tie)	Romantic relationships	24	26	+2
7(tie)	4	Work	20	33	+13
7(tie)	12	Social relationships	20	7	-13
7(tie)	6(tie)	Physical appearance	20	26	+6
10(tie)	9(tie)	Health issues	8	13	+5
10(tie)	11	Other	8	9	+1
12	9(tie)	Individual pupils who continually misbehave	6	13	+7

TABLE 3

Pre-Post Percent and Rank Symptoms of Stress

Rank Pre	Rank Post	Source	Yes (Pre) Percent	Yes (Post) Percent	Change Percent
1	1	General uneasiness	69	63	-6
2	6(tie)	Depressed feeling	51	37	-14
3	2	Snappiness to friends/ family	49	61	+12
4	6(tie)	Knot in my stomach	47	37	-10
5	3(tie)	Headache	41	41	0
6	5	Being very tired	33	39	+6
7	9	Insomnia	25	20	-5
8	3(tie)	Change in eating habits	24	41	+17
9	8	Sweating	20	24	+4
10	11(tie)	Tightness in chest	14	9	-5
11	11(tie)	Breaking out in a rash or hives	12	9	-3
12	10	Sleeping a lot	10	11	+1

These appear in Table 4. On most items for the pre measure students were between "unsure" and "somewhat well prepared." At the end of the field experience students perceived themselves as slightly above "somewhat well prepared." The same trend is seen for pre and post measures for their feeling of comfort for the nineteen items. Student levels of comfort tended to be marginally higher than their perceptions of preparedness; i.e., more toward feeling very comfortable. Student discipline, mastery of testing methods, mastery of subject matter, ability to identify reading problems, ability to match instruction with student needs, and ability to evaluate reading progress were items that appeared to be perceived and felt to be more unsure (about preparedness) than other items.

Interestingly, getting along with the campus supervisor and cooperating teacher were items of perceived high preparation and high comfort as was interacting one-to-one with students. However, in nearly all areas, students perceived they were better prepared and more comfortable after the experience than before field.

Discussion

Undergraduate education students outwardly appear to be concerned, optimistic, confident individuals. Little, however, is known about the level of stress experienced by undergraduates as they proceed through school and prepare to become teachers. Another question we hoped to answer was "Does stress increase or decrease as a field experience

TABLE 4

Pre-Post Perceptions of Field Experience Teacher Preparation and Comfort--Means and Change

Perception of:	Preparation			Feeling of Comfort		
	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change
Handling student discipline problems	2.2	1.8	-.4	2.3	1.9	-.4
As a teacher	2.2	1.7	-.5	2.2	1.5	-.7
Mastery of subject matter	2.4	1.8	-.6	2.2	1.8	-.4
Interacting one-to-one with students	1.5	1.2	-.3	1.3	1.1	-.2
Mastery of testing methods	2.5	2.2	-.3	2.4	2.1	-.3
Using groupwork	2.2	1.8	-.4	1.9	1.5	-.4
Oral & written language skills	2.0	1.6	-.4	1.8	1.5	-.3
Getting along with my cooperating teacher	1.7	1.1	-.6	1.5	1.2	-.3
Ability to identify reading problems	2.3	1.8	-.5	2.5	1.8	-.7
Ability to identify areas of reading strength	2.1	1.8	-.3	2.1	1.8	-.3
Getting along with my campus advisor	1.5	1.3	-.2	1.3	1.3	0
Ability to match instruction with student needs	2.4	1.8	-.6	2.3	1.8	-.5
Ability to evaluate reading progress	2.4	1.9	-.5	2.3	1.8	-.5
Ability to select appropriate seatwork	2.2	1.6	-.6	2.1	1.5	-.6
Ability to reinforce skills presented in reading instruction	2.2	1.6	-.6	2.2	1.5	-.6
Ability to plan a reading lesson	2.0	1.4	-.6	2.0	1.4	-.6
Ability to use basal materials	1.9	1.4	-.5	2.0	1.4	-.6
Overall ability to instruct in reading	2.0	1.5	-.5	2.1	1.5	-.6
Overall ability to instruct in other subject areas	2.2	1.7	-.5	2.4	1.6	-.8

concludes?" Certainly preliminary unobtrusive data suggest that stress may be very high for this age group. The popular literature reports that suicide among this group is high, as is drug and alcohol abuse. However, these data may emanate from other factors such as social relationships and family problems in contrast to school related issues, especially those related to field experiences.

The present study results shed light on these issues: Though not conclusive, these preliminary findings suggest that field experiences alone do not increase stress levels for students. Since other possibly confounding variables were not monitored closely, further study is recommended. These students were taking other classes and moving to the end of a semester. This alone may account for decreased levels of stress.

Interestingly, the level of satisfaction with the university declined, while the reported stress levels also declined. We hypothesized an inverse relationship between the variables of stress and satisfaction consistent with earlier research reported by Feitler and Tokar (1981) for regular classroom teachers.

The sources of stress reported by students, grades, coursework and long hours are not surprising. As the semester progressed work outside the classroom became a greater source of stress. We suspect this would be true even if students were not involved with a field experience. The large decrease in social relationships as a source of

stress should be explored further; certainly several plausible explanations could be offered.

Symptoms of stress most often reported were general uneasiness and snappiness to friends/family. These symptoms hold for others as well. Of interest is the increase in change in eating habits. We do not know how this change manifests itself. Follow-up interviews would provide data to help answer this question.

We were mildly surprised by the results on perceptions and feelings of comfort for teaching tasks and field experience concerns. One thought was that these students would enter the field believing they were well-prepared and they would discover they needed to know a great deal more about teaching as a result of this five week experience; i.e., that teaching is more demanding than they had previously supposed. However, this hypothesis was not supported. These students, in fact, reported they were more sure of their preparation and more comfortable with themselves after the five week field experience.

Although cooperating teachers and supervising teachers may disagree with these perceptions, we are pleased to find students maintaining a positive sense of their teaching readiness and sense of comfort with themselves as pre-service teachers.

Additional research has been suggested. We are continuing with this line of inquiry, including the

collection of physiological data such as blood pressure and pulse rate measures to confirm stress reports.

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